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### Book Review of *Portraits of the Bison: An Illustrated Guide to Bison Society* by Wes Olson

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**Portraits of the Bison: An Illustrated Guide to Bison Society.** By Wes Olson. Photographs by Johane Janelle. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005. xi + 107 pp. Maps, photographs, illustrations, tables, appendixes. \$39.95 paper.

Thundering herds of bison have become synonymous with the pre-European colonization of the Great Plains. As such, they have captured the imagination of countless people, including Wes Olson, a 20-year warden for Parks Canada. Throughout *Portraits of the Bison*, based on both existing literature and the author's extensive experience observing and managing these animals, Olson's bison fascination is not only obvious but infectious. A remarkably talented artist as well, Olson's line drawings appear throughout the book, accompanied by Johane Janelle's photographs.

Following a brief history of bison in North America, the book is divided into two main sections—a guide for interpreting bison behavior, especially pertaining to interactions with humans, and a field guide designed to allow individuals to determine bison herd social structure and identify the age and gender of individual bison. Few previous books have done as impressive a job on these two subjects.

While generally docile, the repercussions of a negative interaction with an angry bull or protective mother can

be severe. Having witnessed many instances of people putting themselves and others in danger by approaching bison too closely and misinterpreting their warning signs, Olson offers a detailed description of bison behavior, with an emphasis on the perils of ignoring such signs, intended to increase the enjoyment and safety of nature enthusiasts. In this regard, his book performs an admirable public service.

It is the section describing how bison morphology varies with gender and age, however, that is the book's most valuable contribution. Olson's many years of bison observation allow him to describe meticulously the changes one would expect to see in bison as they age, along with the differences between the genders at each age interval. These are accompanied by ample illustrations and photographs for each age and gender category. With book in hand, anyone should be able to determine quickly and accurately the gender and age of any bison that happens to cross one's path.

*Portraits of the Bison* clearly lives up to its name, providing abundant descriptions and illustrations of bison behavior and morphology. It is a looking glass into the previously cloudy world of bison society and should be enjoyed by bison enthusiasts and novices alike. **Greg Wilson**, *Department of Biological Sciences, University of Alberta*.